



Activity 4

Aim: carry out a close comparative reading of food details/scenes from contemporary children's literature

This activity provides an overview of some common themes of food symbolism in children's literature along with a sample analysis extracted from a presentation given by a junior academic. The task centres on two slightly longer extracts than in the previous activity; it also includes information on the context of the extracts to help inform your response.

As we have seen, children's literature and culture has preserved the food culture and lore of the medieval peasant. Some commentators see this as detrimental, reducing a multifaceted cultural phenomenon to simple child's play. However, it is entirely possible to read complex ideas into representations of food in children's literature.

Food symbolism in children's literature is used to convey a wide range of themes, including:

- Home and family
- Sex and relationships
- Utopian or arcadian imagery
- Greed and morality
- Power and control
- Inequality and poverty

Read the sample analysis for an example of how these themes can be identified and discussed, then try it yourself by completing the task.

Sample analysis

The following sample analysis discusses food in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Here food is considered in terms of themes including growth and bodily sensation, natural versus manufactured food, issues of power and control, and the relationship between humans and our creations. Remind or familiarise yourself of the scenes described in this analysis – you can access the text at www.gutenberg.org/files/928/928-h/928-h.htm and the relevant chapters are chapters eleven and twelve. Consider how far you agree with the writer's conclusions. What else might the jam tarts signify in this scene?

“In the climactic courtroom scene, Alice's desire to eat the tarts combined with the Hatter's painful confusion of bread-and-butter with teacup prompts a new spurt of growth. Alice starts to grow without having consumed anything, seemingly just in response to seeing the food.



Perhaps there are parallels here with modern advertising, and the findings of neurological research into the effects of marketing and packaging – it is the red can that makes Coke taste better than Pepsi – and it is the sight rather than the consumption of the tarts that affects Alice. This scene also marks a break with the previous six changes in size, all through Alice’s use of natural products. Made objects have a power over Alice that is difficult for her to control. The power of the maker is displaced, contained within the object in a way, and now operating at a level whereby actual consumption is no longer necessary. Whereas previously she has been able to control her changes in size through reasoned and measured use of the mushroom, here the made object reasserts a kind of control over Alice, before she finally seizes control by pointing out to the cards that they themselves are non-human objects, made by humans and subject to human control.” (Hardstaff, 2015)

TASK

Read the two extracts and background information below. Compare and contrast the extracts. Consider the extent to which they convey any of the core themes listed above. Consider, too, the extent to which the background information informs or shapes your analysis.

You could use some or all of the following headings and key words to organise your thoughts:

- Content, meaning, themes
- Genre, form,
- Audience, context
- Voice, perspective, tone, mood
- Language devices, word choices, details

Extract 1

From ‘the candy lady’, *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, 2014

The candy lady’s small living room is filled
with shelves and shelves of chocolate bars
and gumdrops, Good & Plenty and Jujubes,
Moon Pies and Necco Wafers,
lollipops and long red licorice strings.
So much candy that it’s hard to choose
until our grandfather says,
Get what you want but I’m getting myself some ice cream.



Then the candy lady, who is gray-haired
and never smiles, disappears
into another room and returns a few minutes later
with a wafer cone, pale yellow
lemon-chiffon ice cream dripping from it.
Outside, even this late in the afternoon,
the sun is beating down
and the idea of lemon-chiffon ice cream cooling us,
even for a few minutes,
makes us all start saying at once – *Me, too, Daddy.*
Me, too, Daddy. Me, too.

(pp.70-71)

Extract 2

From *Furthermore* by Tahereh Mafi, 2016

“Glass apples were hung from the ceiling, honey-canes gift wrapped in packs of three; figcherry jams were stacked in windows and honeysuckle taffies were spilling out of wooden barrels stacked in each corner. There were walls of iced plums and pomegranates, bushels of baskets weighed down by gold-chocolate leaves and tens of jars of apricot honey that fizzed in your mouth. Alice looked and looked and never tired of the splendor, but she very nearly gasped herself silly when she saw the trays of *zulzuls*. A *zulzul* was a spiral of fried dough, soaked in honey and covered in sugared rose petals; and on any given day, Alice would tell you that *zulzuls* were her favorite pastry. (Note that this confession would be entirely ridiculous, as Alice had never tasted a *zulzul* in her life. But she could *imagine* herself loving *zulzuls*, and somehow, that was enough.)” (pp.62-63)

Background

Brown Girl Dreaming is a memoir written in verse, telling the story of Woodson’s childhood and what it was like for an African-American child growing up in the 1960s and 70s. Woodson contextualises her childhood experiences with references to contemporary events such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, but also places them in a longer historical timeframe going back to her family’s experiences under slavery. This extract is taken from a poem called ‘the candy lady’, describing a Friday ritual for young Jackie and her siblings led by their grandfather. It is set between two very serious political poems, one describing Jackie’s brother being beaten at home for speaking in dialect, the other depicting the adults’ explanations of and involvement in civil rights activism.

Furthermore is a fantasy novel by Iranian-American writer Tahereh Mafi. It features a girl named Alice finding her way in a world where magic is a form of capital – both social and



financial – and she has none (or so we are led to believe). Alice undertakes a quest to find her father, evoking the myth of Persephone, with the help of an annoying classmate, Oliver. Alice and Oliver's quest includes several food scenes that are typical of children's literature, including encounters with cannibals. The scene in this extract takes place in the sweet shop of Alice's town on the eve of a coming-of-age performance where Alice and her peers will showcase their magic and be assigned quests. Alice has very little money and in the end settles on buying one small sweet.